

FACES OF THE COAST



Jon Hauge/The Mississippi Press

Laura McKenzie

Laura McKenzie has been a cardiac sonographer for 30 years, and seven of those years she has been with the Singing River Hospital System. Her husband, Wayne, is a vascular

technologist and they both work in the non-invasive cardiology department. McKenzie has a 19-year-old daughter named Kaitlin. They live in Gautier and McKenzie enjoys going out to the

islands on the family boat. She wants to take up golf. McKenzie said, "I want to learn how to play golf so I can play with my husband, but I also want to beat him, too."

Alamia, McKenzie

Mars, Hall

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FIVE GENERATIONS



Submitted by Michelle Mars

A fifth generation addition was welcomed recently to this family. Emery Rhyss Alamia, born May 26, 2011, is held by her great-grandmother, Kathleen McKenzie, 92, of Pascagoula. Standing, from left, are Michelle Mars of Vancleave, grandmother; Ellen Rebecca Hall of Pascagoula, great-grandmother; and Bethany Alamia of Hurley, mother.

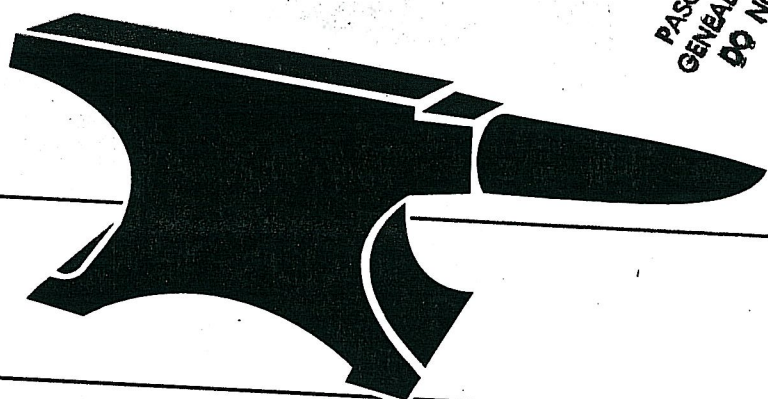
Monroe County

McKenzie

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The ANVIL still rings in Smithville

A 70-year tradition is being carried on by Bunk McKenzie in his blacksmith shop at Smithville.



By Floyd Mobley

Once the ring of the blacksmith's anvil was a common sound in Mississippi's small towns and villages. This symbol of early America lasted well into the twentieth century. But as horse and buggy days faded into the past, so did the blacksmith's shop—everywhere except in the small Monroe County town of Smithville, that is.

Today, Leon (Bunk) McKenzie is carrying on a tradition that began nearly 70 years ago. His blacksmith shop and Nabors Store are the oldest remaining businesses in this northeast Mississippi town. Recently, Denver (Fiddle) Wright, who formerly worked with McKenzie in the blacksmith shop, has returned to help carry on the family tradition.

In addition to serving as the town's blacksmith shop, it is also a community gathering place. Many of the older, retired people like to come by and visit in front of the electric fan in summer or the coal-burning heater in winter.

"Our daddies, Elmer McKenzie and Herse Wright, were kinfolks who came down here from Alabama and became partners in this blacksmith shop about 1924," McKenzie says. "It was known as McKenzie and Wright until his daddy sold out to my daddy and went to the farm in 1940."

McKenzie, who was born shortly after the shop first opened, has operated it for the past 48 years. He and Fiddle Wright worked there together for seven years before Fiddle went to work for Kerr-McGee in the machine shop. Now Fiddle

has retired from that job after 23 years and is back helping Bunk in the blacksmith shop.

"Our daddies or him and me have never closed it up for a vacation or anything like that," McKenzie says. "It used to be open six days a week from daylight to dark but now we take Wednesday and Saturday evenings off."

The only time the shop has closed in

nearly 70 years has been maybe a half-day for a sickness or a funeral, McKenzie explains. "When it's just one here you're tied down pretty close," he says, "but now that Fiddle is back, it helps when I need to run off a little bit for something."

Bunk McKenzie says that he and Fiddle were practically raised in the blacksmith shop. They were kept busy cleaning and sweeping up.

"A long time ago we would

build wagons and trailers and things like that in the winter time," he says. "They've done away with the horses, mules and plows in farm work now so we don't do that kind of work any more."

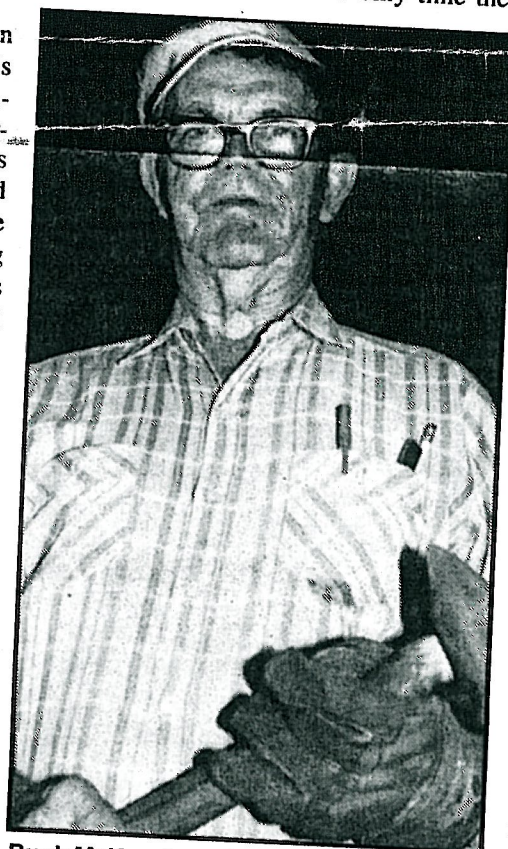
When they first started out, there wasn't any electricity and everything was done by hand, Fiddle recalls. This meant no power hammers, no welders, and all the welding had to be done in the forge.

"When something was being welded in the forge, it would get so hot it was

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Fiddle Wright is sharpening and straightening bushhog blades at the anvil his father once used.



Bunk McKenzie

THE ANVIL STILL RINGS

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ready to melt," he says. "If there was kids in here and they hit something with the hammer, they would holler 'run' and we would take off because the fire would go everywhere."

Back in those days only a limited number of things could be welded, according to Fiddle. "I've got some things that my daddy welded that I wouldn't take anything for," he adds.

"Old-timey wash pots would freeze and crack in the winter, and I'd rather have seen anything in the world come in than one of them," Bunk says. It would take a half-day to weld one and I'd rather tackle anything than that."

The original anvils that their fathers brought from Alabama are still in the shop. Only one of them is being used now, because Bunk says he wore the other one out while Fiddle was gone.

"We have added some different tools other than what our daddies started with such as electric hammers," Bunk says. "The work's gotten easier but we do so much more that we get just as tired as we ever did."

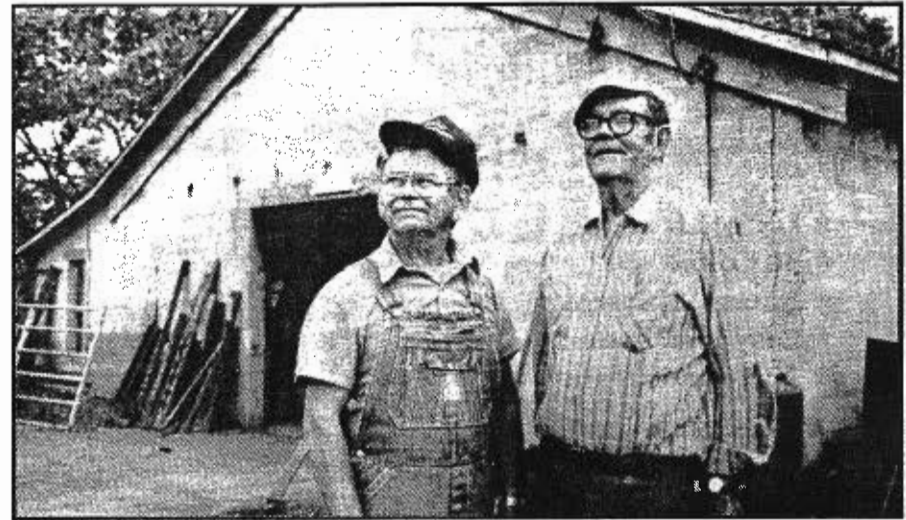
The bulk of the work today consists of straightening and sharpening bushhog blades, rebuilding bushhogs and farm equipment, and fixing snaking tongs for loggers. Another service is keeping front-end loader and dragline teeth built up. They also do welding and miscellaneous jobs.

"When people don't have a blacksmith they have to buy new stuff," Bunk says. "Our job is to save things from the junk pile," he adds with a chuckle.

"The hardest thing about it now is getting any coal that's fit to burn in the forges," according to Bunk McKenzie. "We got two loads from Chattanooga, Tennessee, and found a little bit at Johns,



Bunk McKenzi works at the anvil in the shop.



Bunk McKenzie (right) and Fiddle Wright are shown in front of the blacksmith shop their fathers started in the small Monroe County town.

Alabama, that burns fair, but it's not regular blacksmith's coal."

In addition to meeting the blacksmithing needs of the area, McKenzie's shop is also the unofficial community center. Each morning, especially on a rainy day when they can't get out in the yard, a group of older friends will come to visit and pass the time of day.

"I'm glad to have the company," Bunk McKenzie says. "A lot of crops are being made and a lot of fish are being caught right in front of the heater or the fan,

depending on what time of year it is."

Once there were blacksmith shops in almost every Mississippi town and on many farms, but they exist only in museums or living history exhibits today. Yet Bunk McKenzie and Fiddle Wright have adapted to the times. They are carrying on a delightful family tradition while preserving an important reminder of early American life. It's easy to see that despite the hard work, they are enjoying every minute of it.